ARNOLD ARBORETUM
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

FLORICULTURE

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OF POPULAR INFORMATION

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LEATHERWOOD (*Dirca palustris*). Not even the snow and rain of this year's tardy spring have discouraged the Leatherwood. Since late March it has been slowly creeping into flower, one blossom at a time, and now in mid-April is a beautiful sight. The graceful little flowers of waxy yellow-green hang in groups of three along the dark, zig-zag branches. Bud-scales and young leaves arch protectingly above the flower clusters, and if the bush as a whole is not very conspicuous, it has at least an unusual perfection of small detail and a general air of quality and finish.

Delicate though the flowers may be, the species is well deserving of its popular name as anyone will find who attempts to gather the flowering twigs without a sharp knife. The branches are surprisingly limber and the bark is tough and strong. One can actually tie the twigs in bow knots. If one attempts to snap off a branch quickly the wood itself may break and separate from the bark. It may even come away altogether, leaving the startled flower-gatherer with a perfectly bare twig in his hand and on the bush, dangling like an empty glove, the bark with its flowers and leaves still intact.

This remarkable fibrous bark has never been put to use in commercial quantities though it was known to the Indians and the early pioneers are said to have used it for cordage. Its various common names, Leatherwood, Thongwood, Thongbark, Wickopy and Ropewood, show that its peculiar qualities were at least well known if not extensively used.

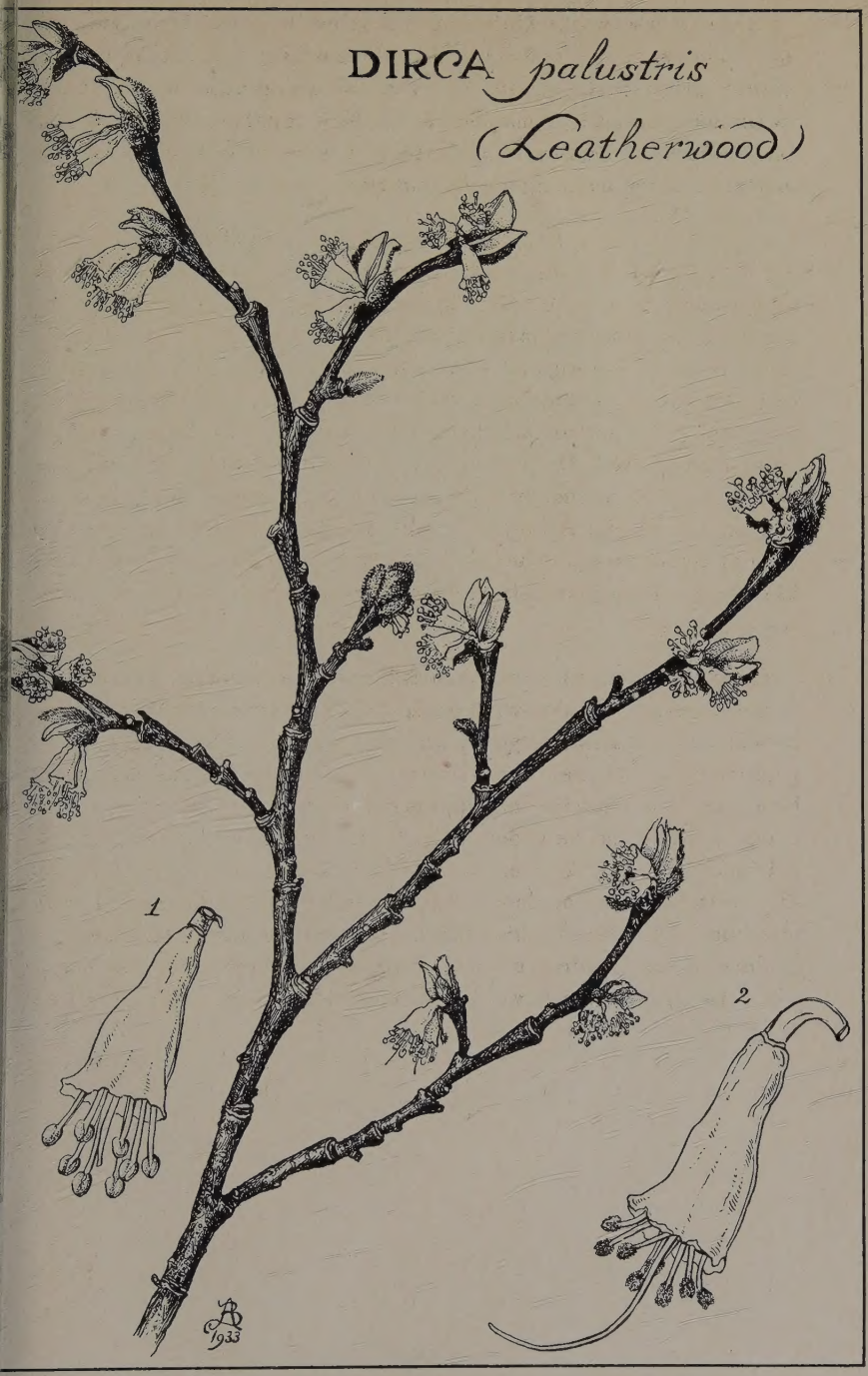
Though seldom found growing in great abundance it is one of the most widely distributed American shrubs, for it is native from the Province of Quebec south to the Appalachicola River in Florida and west

as far as Missouri and Oklahoma. It grows in a variety of soils and under a diversity of conditions, though usually it avoids limestone. It is often found in the vicinity of water, so prevailingly so that one of its common names is Swampwood. In New England it prefers cool, damp woods; in Missouri and Indiana it is found most commonly on sandstone outcrops along creeks and rivers.

Its wide tolerance of different soils and situations should help to make it better known as a shrub for the small garden. It is not particularly conspicuous, to be sure, but it blossoms in the very early spring, and the flowering branches make dainty table decorations. The foliage is clear and clean looking and while the bush may not grow rapidly that very fact may be a point in its favor. A bush of Leatherwood will always stay in the picture and never get too large for the frame in which it has been planted. Only two points can be raised in its disfavor. The branches are so lax that on old specimens, such as those along the Lilac Path at the Arnold Arboretum, they will be bent down and cracked open by heavy snows. The other objection to the Leatherwood is that like many garden plants, the daffodil for instance, it contains a poisonous principle.

The poisonous qualities of the Leatherwood have not been extensively investigated. It is known that the bark and young fruits, taken internally are a violent purgative and that mashed up and made into a poultice they will even blister the skin. Leatherwood has sometimes been used as a medicine though it is not officially recognized as a drug plant. Little could be added today to the account which Dr. Bigelow published in his "Medical Botany" over a century ago and which the worthy Doctor concluded with the following comments, "I have introduced the Dirca in this place not so much because it has been yet applied to any medical purpose of great importance, but because it would be improper, in a work like the present, to pass over unnoticed a shrub of such decided activity".

EDGAR ANDERSON


DIRCA palustris
(Leatherwood)
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PLANTS OF CURRENT INTEREST. The closely related Eurasian genus, *Daphne*, is better known to gardeners than the American genus *Dirca*. Like the latter, it is made up of low, much-branched shrubs with tough, fibrous bark and a tendency to winter or spring flowering. *Daphne Cneorum*, which is being very much planted in American gardens, is only one of fifteen or twenty species which at one time or another have been in cultivation. For the most part they do not take kindly to New England. The old-fashioned Mezereum, scientifically known as *D. Mezereum*, is an outstanding exception to this generalization. It has even run wild in some parts of New England, and has this year done unusually well in the Arboretum where a large planting of it can be seen next to the collection of *Dirca palustris* on the Lilac drive. Gardeners who know only *D. Cneorum* may at first sight believe that there is some mistake in the label. Although the flowers resemble that species in being pink and fragrant, they are borne so differently on the branches that the plant is given quite a different aspect. While the flowers have as usual been more or less injured by the cold, wet weather, they have provided a show of bright color for nearly a month and have at all times been deliciously fragrant.

At the moment of writing (April 25) the Forsythias, Magnolias, and early flowering Cherries, which have been held back by the tardy season, are just coming into bloom. Unless there is a killing frost they should provide a fine display during the first week in May.

EDGAR ANDERSON

EXPLANATION OF THE PLATE

Dirca palustris, Natural size.

Fig. 1. Young flower, three times natural size.

Fig. 2. Mature flower, three times natural size.

(Drawing by Blanche Ames Ames.)